
Reviewed by Lia T. Bascomb (Georgia State University)

Published on H-Caribbean (July, 2024)

Commissioned by Aaron Coy Moulton (Stephen F. Austin State University)

Marcus Garvey is an iconic figure in both historical scholarship and popular memory. The impact of his legacy is prevalent around the world and can be traced through a number of anti-colonial movements and organizations since the heyday of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Scholars such as Colin Grant, Winston James, Rupert Lewis, Tony Martin, and Leigh Raiford, to name a few, have detailed his life and the rise and lasting impact of both his outsize personality and the movement that he led. Donna McFarlane adds to this legacy from a very different vantage point.

Representing Blackness: The Marcus Mosiah Garvey Multimedia Museum is a timely text in which the late Donna McFarlane traces Marcus Garvey’s legacy using museum design to give an account of her work building the Marcus Mosiah Garvey Multimedia Museum (MMGMM) within the refurbished Liberty Hall in Kingston, Jamaica. Established in 2003, the MMGMM is a twenty-first-century museum that, in McFarlane’s words, is “an example of development of a community museum that inspires, excites and educates, while raising the self-esteem and self-identity of its majority viewers” (p. 7). McFarlane transitioned into the museum world after working in developmental economics. She returned to her home of Jamaica in the late 1970s, and her work as a curatorial director began at a moment of renewed interest in Garvey scholarship, a rethinking of Jamaican and broader Caribbean identities, and shifts in museum studies. McFarlane’s return to Jamaica after years abroad and her subsequent career trajectory is detailed in the prologue. Written by esteemed Caribbean studies scholar A. Lynn Bolles, the prologue reads as a tender offering from a dear friend and colleague who has turned McFarlane’s dissertation into a book and in doing so positioned her work for a wider audience. Readers get an insider’s look at the process and trajectory of the author through her dear friend, an offering beyond what many prologues attempt. Bolles writes that “Representing Blackness is an examination of the essential role that museums play in telling a people’s history from the perspective of
the majority culture, one born in the throes of colonialism, enslavement, post-emancipation, pre-colonial rule, manumission, independence and sovereignty under the heavy hand of globalization” (p. xvi). As readers we are called to note the importance of McFarlane’s curatorial work and thus the book that follows.

McFarlane’s introduction gives an overview of Marcus Garvey’s biography and legacy for readers who may not be familiar with it. In chapter 1, McFarlane lays out the book’s goals, namely, to present a “modern museological approach,” disseminate Marcus Garvey’s philosophy, and reform education toward social transformation (p. 1). She proves her thesis across nine short chapters. The first five chapters strive to lay out the scene in which the MMGMM emerged. The first two chapters provide a historical overview of museums in Jamaica and curatorial practice more generally. Here McFarlane notes the museum studies landscape as well as what role museums play within broader practices of representation. These chapters lead to a further conversation on the role of Blackness within Jamaican identity and how early colonial structures have shaped how Black Jamaicans see themselves within the nation and as part of the larger Black world. She details a history of how colonial structures in Jamaica offered museums as a way to “inject a good dose of English culture,” positing Englishness as an ideal and denigrating all other cultures as unworthy (p. 8). These are the sections where this book reads most like a dissertation. While these sections are necessary as context to McFarlane’s main offering, they don’t offer much new in the way of scholarship. The brief overviews of big concepts, however, do provide a useful introductory resource for readers less familiar with colonialism, exhibition histories, and racial discourses in the Caribbean.

The latter half of the text, where McFarlane focuses more on the MMGMM itself, are the most impactful. Here she notes how the museum came to be and the many parties involved. She traces the history of Liberty Hall and its role in the structure of the UNIA before noting how the Friends of Liberty Hall Foundation came to be in 2002. McFarlane’s work as a curator employing community-based design and praxis shines in these chapters. She details the ins and outs of fundraising, community input, physical museum design and layout, the content of the multimedia, and most importantly, where and how Garvey’s ideology is employed in a twenty-first-century multimedia space. There were an impressive number of community, government, institutional, and international partners that brought the MMGMM and its programming to life. McFarlane centers these efforts in the goal of reimagining Blackness beyond the colonial histories that position Black identities as inferior or less worthy of representation and study. Her work is targeted toward Black Jamaican youth, and the MMGMM partnered with eighteen all-age and primary schools while also including programming and skills-based educational outreach for adults. Throughout the latter four chapters McFarlane implores fellow curators to serve the communities in which they are located and clearly details how the MMGMM staff engaged with the residents of Love Lane (the area surrounding Liberty Hall) to learn what they wanted from the space and to build a safe, practical, educational, community home together.

Unsurprisingly, given its topic, the text takes an unapologetically Afrocentric Pan-Africanist approach. The author stakes her position in chapter 1 when she writes, “I agree in support of Garvey’s position that black people must first see perfection in themselves through Afrocentric historical perspectives to raise positive self-identity and that museums can be strategic tools in this exercise” (p. 4). She bases this position on chapter 6 of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) and comes to the conclusion that the psychological ills of Black Jamaican society “cannot be tackled with nuanced approaches to teaching Africa’s history” (p. 4). While the text is clearly about Blackness, what might a more nuanced and even non-
unicentric approach to celebrating Blackness yield? In a 1999 article titled “Beyond Unicentricity,” Carole Boyce Davies implores scholars to think beyond margin-center dialogues. In her critique of Eurocentricism, she notes how part of what makes it so pernicious is its insistence on hierarchy. Davies unequivocally accounts for the drastically unequal power dynamics between Eurocentrism and other centric discourses, while critiquing some strains of Afrocentricity on the grounds that as a counterdiscourse, as a reaction, it is still defined by dominant discourse; it still produces a totalizing discourse; and it rarely deals with contemporary African realities, relying instead on an ongoing invention of an African imaginary. Instead, Davies offers “Crosscultural African Diaspora discourses ... [that] ... speak to the variety of movements ushered in by migrations and the consistent reproduction of different modes of being in the world.” Such an approach does not strive for the universality that Fanon is so resistant to, but rather posits the possibilities of a framework that acknowledges “multiple and equal centers,” not requiring a hierarchy between or the perfection of any single one.[1] Especially given the Indigenous and Asian experiences with colonialism, contributions to Jamaican history, and interactions with Black Jamaican populations, how might an approach that does not strive for or purport the “perfection” of Blackness further bolster a complete history of African identities and Blackness on the island and in the region? Such an approach would build on the many different ways Marcus Garvey’s philosophy has been and can be employed while taking into account some of the limitations and critiques he encountered.

Much of what could be seen as flaws of the text are found in the framing and the finishing. It is not until the uncredited epilogue that the reader learns that this is posthumously published dissertation.[2] Knowing that at the outset may help readers to discern exactly who the audience for the book is and otherwise shape how a reader might approach the text. Similarly, it is not clear when the epilogue and the prologue were written in relation to the text itself. While the writing is engaging and the intellectual offering valuable, they are both hampered by an unusual number of typos, grammatical mistakes, and uneven citations that could have been corrected with more rigorous proofreading. In terms of the content, McFarlane clearly accomplishes her goals as laid out in the introduction, but some of the contextual chapters reveal notable omissions. Though mentioned briefly, Amy Ashwood Garvey’s and Amy Jacques Garvey’s contributions to Marcus Garvey’s legacy, to the UNIA as an organization, and to Pan-African legacies more broadly receive short shrift. Similarly, the many critiques of Marcus Garvey (which are arguably also an important part of his legacy) hardly appear at all in the text. While there are brief biographies of both Marcus Garvey and the UNIA, traditional historians may be frustrated by the inconsistent use of dates and historical periodization. McFarlane uses the term “diasporic” several times, but this is an area that could use more illustration. Her curatorial work seeks to reframe Blackness for Black Jamaicans, and she notes using sources from outside of Jamaica. It would have been nice to have a more robust discussion of the connections that she was making or even a discussion on the overlapping discourses of Pan-Africanism and African diaspora and how she framed them in her work. The MMGMM is clearly rooted locally and serves the local population, while also attracting visitors from across Jamaica, the Caribbean, and other sites in the African diaspora. McFarlane surveyed the school-aged youth visitors about their concepts of self-identity, giving readers data as well as description to illustrate how the museum sought to achieve its goals in changing notions of Blackness amongst Jamaica’s youth. There is also evidence that does not appear in the book that folks living abroad find the MMGMM to be an important resource. At least some of the Pan-Africanist and African diasporic connections that readers have access to now may
not have been as visible at the time of her writing.

Representing Blackness also has many strengths. McFarlane gives a deft example of how to employ rather than merely rehash Marcus Garvey’s legacy by consciously building the MMGMM on the ideological foundations of the UNIA. She thoughtfully reframes the prevalence of violence in Jamaica (historically and presently). She enters into the continuing discussions on national identity and its relation to difficult, violent, exploitative histories and their effects on the present by focusing on national museums’ roles in changing discourses of representation. All of this is done through an adept application of contemporary curatorial theory. McFarlane’s contribution to Pan-Africanist discourse comes directly through a decolonial and democratized museum studies framework. The book itself gives audiences who have not yet been to Kingston’s MMGMM an understanding of how these fields can be employed together.

McFarlane’s curatorial attention to different learning styles supports the educational mission of the MMGMM, opens the audience for the museum to a broader range of populations, and through the use of multimedia repositions stereotypical notions of Blackness in relation to technology. In this way it is in conversation with other primarily Black multimedia spaces such as Ben Caldwell’s Kaos Network (formerly Video 3333) in Los Angeles.[4] Founded in the 1980s and rooted in the needs of the Leimert Park area that it serves, the space is described by Caldwell as “an artistic cultural oasis in Leimert Park Village curating positive shared experiences in BlackDesign (Afrofuturism), music, and technology.”[5] While Kaos Network is an arts center and the MMGMM a historical museum, both sites serve a local predominantly Black community while maintaining and creating ties to broader visions of who they are and who they can be through a multimedia approach. This approach allows for a fluidity that posits African and wider Black traditions as not only “modern” and flexible but also actively engaged in growth. McFarlane uses her curatorial strategy to demonstrate how to hold histories and employ them toward chosen futures.

Overall, Representing Blackness is an undoubtedly useful work and demonstrates the significance of McFarlane’s contributions; the impact of community-oriented, collaborative curatorial practice; and the ongoing questions of Black Jamaican identity and what Pan-African frameworks have to offer those conversations.

Notes


[3]. For example, the UK-based Black History Studies organization posted publicly about their visit to the MMGMM on YouTube, but this may have been at the tail end of McFarlane’s writing of the text. Black History Studies: “Black History Studies Visits The Marcus Mosiah Garvey Multimedia Museum at Liberty Hall, Kingston,” December 11, 2011, Youtube, video, 1:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DrIcSjJGA8.


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-caribbean


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60592

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.